

THE STRIPED CHEST.

By CONAN DOYLE.

"What do you make of her, Allardye?" I asked.

My second mate was standing beside me upon the pier, with his short, thick legs stretched for the sake of a considerable swell behind it, and our two quarter-boats nearly touched the water with every roll.

He studied his glass against the sunset and he looked long and hard at this disconsolate stranger every time she came teeling up on to the crest of a roller and hung balanced for a few seconds before swooping down upon the other side. She lay so low in the water that it could only catch an occasional glimpse of a peagreen line of bulwark. She was a brig, but her mainmast had been snapped short of some ten feet above the deck and no effort seemed to have been made to cut away the wreckage, which floated, sails and yards, like the broken wing of a wounded gull, upon the water beside her. The foremast was still standing, but the foretopmast was flying loose, and the headsails were streaming out in long white pennants. Her crew had probably I seen several which appeared to have gone through rougher handling.

But we could not be surprised at that, for there had been times during the last three days when it was a question whether our own bark would ever see boot again. For thirty-six hours we had kept her steady, but our mainmast had not been as good as a sea-bolt as ever left the Clyde and could not have come through. And yet here we were at the end of it with the loss only of our rig and a part of the starboard bulwark. It did not astonish us, however, when the smother had cleared away to find that she had been lucky and that the ship's hull had been under a needless sky, had been left, like a blinded man after a blinding flash, to tell of the terror which it had.

Allardye, who was a slow and methodical Scotchman, stared long and hard at the bulwark craft, which our seamen lined the fore and aft of the quarter-boats to see. In latitude 20 degrees and longitude 10 becomes a little dull about our bearings, but I became a little dull about our bearings, for I was one has left the main line of Atlantic commerce to the north. For ten days we had been rattling over a solitary sea.

"Shog derelict, I'm thinking," said the second mate.

I had come to the same conclusion, for I could see no sign of life upon her deck, and there was no answer to the friendly wailings from our seamen. Her crew had probably deserted her under the impression that she was about to founder.

"She can't last long," continued Allardye. In his measured way, "she may put her head down and her tail up any day." The water was rippling up to the edge of her rail.

"What's her flag?" I asked.

"I'm trying to make out. It's got all twisted and tangled with the haliards. Yes, I've got it now, clear through. It's the Brazilian flag, but it's wrong side up.

She had hoisted a signal of distress, then, before her people had abandoned her. Perhaps they had only just done. I took the mate's glass and looked round over the sun-baked face of the deep blue Atlantic, still veined and starred with white lines and splittings of foam. But nowhere could I see anything human beyond ourselves.

"There may be living men aboard," said I.

"There may be salvage," muttered the second mate.

"Then we will run down upon her lee side and look for her."

We were not more than 100 yards from her when we saw our foreyard aback, and there we were, the bark and the brig, ducking and bobbing like two clowns in a dance.

"Drop one of the quarter-boats," said I. "Take four men, Mr. Allardye, and see what you can learn of her."

But just at that moment my first officer, Mr. Armstrong, came on deck, for seven bells had struck and it was but a few minutes off his watch. It would interest me to go myself to this abandoned vessel in a canoe, but there might be aboard of her. So, with a word to Armstrong, I swung myself over the side, slipped down the fall and took my place in the sheets of the boat.

It was but a little distance, but it took some time to traverse and so heavy was the roll that often when we were in the trough of the sea we could not see either the bark which we had left nor the brig which we were approaching. The sinking sun did not penetrate down there, and it was cold and dark in the hollow of the waves, but each passing billow heaved us up into the warmth and the sunshine once more. At each of these moments I saw a glimpse of a white ridge between the two dark valleys. I caught a glimpse of the long peagreen line and the nodding foremast of the brig, and I wondered as we went on whether we were approaching. That might determine which was the best way of boarding her. As we passed her we saw the name *Nosa Senhora da Victoria* printed across the bows.

"The weather side, sir," said the second mate. "Stand by with the boat-hook, carpenter." An instant later we had jumped over the bulwark, which was lower than our boat, and found ourselves upon the deck of the abandoned vessel.

Our first thought was to provide for our own safety in case we should find anything valuable. The vessel should settle down beneath our feet. With this object two of our men held on to the painter of the boat, and the other might be ready in case we had to make a hurried retreat. The carpenter was sent to find out how much cargo there was, and whether it was still gaining, while the other companion and myself made a rapid inspection of the vessel and her cargo.

The deck was littered with wreckage and with benches, in which the dead birds were washing about. The boats were gone, with the exception of one, the bottom of which had been stove, and it was found that the crew had abandoned the vessel. The cabin was in a deckhouse, one side of which had been beaten in by a heavy sea. Allardye and I entered it, and found that the table was had left it, his books and papers—all Spanish or Portuguese—scattered over it. With piles of silverware and everything else I looked about for the log, but could not find it.

"As likely as not he never kept one," said Allardye. "That's a serious drawback about a South American trader, and they don't do more than they can help. If there was one it must have been taken away with him in the boat."

"I should like to take all these books and papers," said I. "Ask the carpenter how much time we have."

His report was reassuring. The vessel was full of water, but some of the cargo was buoyant, and there was no immediate danger of her sinking. Probably she would never sink, but would drift about as one of these terrible unmarked reefs which have sent so many stout vessels to the bottom.

"In that case there is no danger in your going below," said I. "See what you can make of her, and find out how much of her cargo can be saved. I'll look through these papers while you are gone."

The hills of lading and some notes and letters which lay upon the deck sufficed to inform me that the brig was *Nosa Senhora da Victoria* had cleared from Bahia a month before. The name of the captain was Teixeira, but there was no record as to the number of the crew. She was bound for London, and a glance at the bills of lading was sufficient to show me that she was likely to profit much in the way of salvage. Her cargo consisted of nuts, ginger and wood, the latter in the shape of great logs of valuable tropical growths. It was these, no doubt, which had prevented the ill-fated vessel from going to the bottom, but they were of such a size as to make it impossible for us to extract them. Besides these there were a few fancy goods, such as a number of ornamental birds for millinery purposes and 100 cases of preserved fruits. And then, as I turned over the papers I came upon a short note in English which arrested my attention.

It is requested, said the note, "that the various old Spanish and Indian curiosities which came out of the Santarem collection, and which are consigned to Pronfont & Neuman of Oxford street, London, should be put in some place where there may be no danger of these very valuable and unique

articles being injured or tampered with. This applies most particularly to the treasure chest of Don Ramirez di Leyra, which must on no account be placed where any one can get at it."

The treasure chest of Don Ramirez! Unique and valuable articles! Here was a chance of salvage after all! I had risen to my feet with the paper in my hand when my Scotch mate appeared in the doorway.

"I'm thinking all isn't quite as it should be aboard of this ship, sir," said he. He was a burly fellow and I could see that he had been startled.

"What's the matter?"

"Murder's the matter, sir. There's a man here with his brains beaten out."

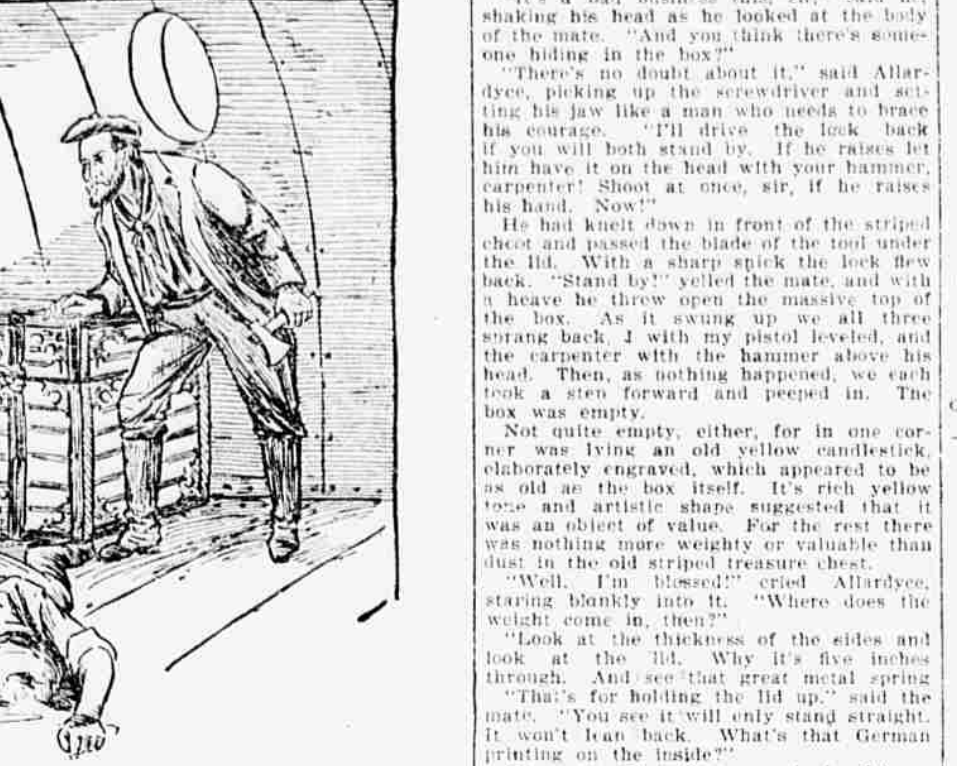
"Killed in the storm," said I.

"Maybe so, sir. But I'll be surprised if you think an aforesaid man have seen him."

"Where is he, then?"

"This way, sir—here in the main deck house."

There appeared to have been no accommodation below the brig, for there was the after house for the captain, another by the main hatchway with the cook's galley attached to it, and a third in the forepart for the men. It was to this middle one that the mate led me. As you entered, the galley with its litter of tumbled pots and dishes was upon the right, and upon the left was a small room with two bunks for the officers. Then beyond was a place about twelve feet square, which was littered with flags and Spanish canyas. All round the walls were a number of racks, hung up in coarse cloth and carefully lashed to the woodwork. At the other end was a great box, striped red and white, though the red was so faded and the white so dirty that it was only where the light fell directly upon it that one could see the coloring. The box was by subsequent measurement four feet



"I'LL DRIVE THE LOCK BACK IF YOU WILL BOTH STAND BY."

three inches in length, three feet two inches in height and three feet across—considerably larger than a seaman's chest.

But it was not to the box that my eyes or my thoughts were turned as I entered the storeroom. On the floor, lying across the litter of bunting, there was stretched a small, dark man, with a short, curling beard. He lay as far as it was possible from the box with his feet toward it and his head away. A round crimson halo was printed upon the white canvas on which his head was resting, and I understood, without any need of explanation, that his swarthy neck and trailed away to the floor, but there was no sign of a wound that I could see, and his face was as pale as a sheet. A sleeping child in a woman's dress, and then I turned away with an exclamation of horror. He had been poleaxed apparently by some person standing behind him. A frightful blow had smashed in the top of his head and penetrated deeply into his brain. The face might well be called for dead, but his eyes were absolutely instantaneous, and the position of the wound showed that he could never have seen the person who had inflicted it.

"That foul play or accident, Captain Barclay," asked my second mate demurely.

"You are quite right, Mr. Allardye." The man has been murdered—struck down from above by a sharp and heavy weapon. But who was he, and why did they murder him?"

"He was a common sailor, sir," said the mate. "He was seen at it if you look at his fingers." He turned up his pockets as he spoke and brought to light a pack of cards, some tarred string and a bundle of Brazilian tobacco.

"Hullo, look at this!" said he.

It was a large open knife with a stiff spring blade, which he had picked up from the floor. The blade was shining and bright so that we could not associate it with the crime, and yet the dead man had apparently held it in his hand as he was struck down, for it still lay within his grasp.

"It looks to me, sir, as if he knew he was in danger, and kept his knife handy," said the mate. "However, can't help the poor beggar now. I can't make these things out that are lashed to the wall. They seem to be idols and weapons and curios of all sorts done up in old sackings and such like."

"That's right," said I. "They are the only things of value that we are likely to find in this cargo. Have the boys get them to send the other quarter-boat to help us to get the stuff aboard."

While he was away I examined this curious painter, which had been left on the possession. The curiosities were so wrapped up that I could only form a general idea as to their nature, but the striped box stood in a good light where I could thoroughly examine it. On the lid, which was clamped and cornered with metal work, there was engraved a complex coat of arms, and it was able to decipher as meaning "The treasure chest of Don Ramirez di Leyra, knight of the order of St. James, was captured in the bay of Terra Firma and of the province of Veracruz." In one corner was the date 1606, and on the other a large white label upon which was written in English, "This is a very complex and heavy one of engraved steel with a Latin motto, which was above a seaman's comprehension."

By the time I had finished this examination of the peculiar box the other quarter-boat with Mr. Armstrong, the first officer, and some ablative, and we began to carry out and place in her the various curiosities which appeared to be the only objects worth moving from the derelict ship. When she had left I saw that I could not recall the mate and Allardye and I, with the carpenter, and one seaman, carried the striped box and lowered it over the bulwark. Upon the two middle thwarts, for it was so heavy that it would have given the boat a dangerous list were it placed in the stern. As to the dead man, we left him where we had found him. The mate had a dagger in his hand, and he was at the bottom of the ship, his yellow hair starting, plundering, and that the captain, in an attempt to preserve discipline, had struck him down with a hatchet or some other heavy weapon. It seemed more probable than any other explanation and yet it did not entirely satisfy me. Other, but the ocean is full of mysteries, and we were content to leave the fate of the dead seaman of the Brazilian brig to be added to that list which every sailor can recall. The heavy box was slung up by ropes on to the deck of the *Mary Sinclair*, and there, carried by four seamen into a cabin where, between the table and the after lockers, there was just space for it to stand. There it remained during supper, and after which the mate remained with me, and discussed over a glass of grog the event of the day. Mr. Armstrong was a long, thin, culture-like man, an excellent seaman, but famous for his neatness and cu-

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